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## Going transnational? News from down under: Transnational History Symposium, Canberra, Australian National University, September 2004

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**Abstract:** Building from the papers and discussions presented at the Transnational History Symposium (Canberra, Australian National University, September 2004), this article offers a view into some of the current developments and discussions that take place while historians are grappling with the 'transnational take'. In a discipline that has been closely connected with the birth of the nation states, this developing attention for the flows, circulation and connection across borders is not without its risks, pitfalls and difficulties. But there is a promising bunch of studies and interests that are developing within the historical community, all suggesting that they can contribute to the contextualisation and understanding of global networks.

The conference, which provided the basis for this review, was an exciting one. While it took place in Canberra (Australia) in September 2004, many of us participants had this euphorising feeling that we were taking part to some kind of 'first', and that we were able to contribute to shape a yet unmoulded historiographical pattern at a moment when historians begin to embrace a pattern that has been flourishing in other disciplines.<sup>1</sup> That is, indeed, a pleasant feeling to explore dimensions and perspectives without having to care too much for definitions, to venture care freely into fields and questions without respecting our respective subdisciplinary overspecialisations and to breathe the air of debate and discussion without being too much concerned by canons and the

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Transnational History symposium' was organised by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, and took place at the Humanities Research Center of the Australian National University. The conference proceedings will be published by the ANU Press.

The programme can be found at:

[http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/conferences/conference\\_archive/2004/TransNational\\_History.php](http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/conferences/conference_archive/2004/TransNational_History.php).

usual apparatus of our disciplined behaviours. As divers know, though, euphoria can also be dangerous: historical staggers can lead to a loss of balance and bearings. The most tempting of all those is probably to dismiss comparative, local, world or national histories as obsolete, and to build the fate or transnational history as the good side in a series of dichotomies (up to date/out of date, transnational/local, universal/parochial, relevant/irrelevant). This report, which does not escape those risks, nevertheless proposes some decompression stages to control some of them. Mostly, it will try to put this conference in context, by offering some links to the various proposals that, in different parts of the world, have made similar moves in the direction of a transnational perspective in history.

It is on purpose that the words of ‘a transnational perspective in history’ have just been used. It would have been easier to write ‘in the direction of a transnational history’. But it is not the orientation of this report to suggest that something called ‘transnational history’ should be the next big thing, something that would deserve to be presented as a new paradigm which destiny it is to overturn previous frameworks, an up and coming sub-discipline that would deserve its own institutional space. Rather, it is suggested here that ‘going transnational’ is about adopting a perspective, an angle. Going transnational is not moving to a different field of study, shifting allegiances and references. Rather, it is something that many historians can do to find a way to respond questions that lay unanswered on their working desks since a while. Maybe, after all one does not decide to do ‘transnational history’, but it is rather the research one is developing that calls for the development of a transnational angle. To explain briefly what it means, I would accept the simple definition that the transnational angle cares for movements and forces that cut across national boundaries. It means goods, it means people, it means ideas, words, capital, might, and institutions. It may be useful to have a more sophisticated definition later, but that will do for now. This is enough to put it into perspective and to ask a few questions about the transnational angle.

## The world beyond Canberra

During the conference, several manifestations of how this transnational take can be developed were presented under the signature of Australian and New Zealand historians. Most do match similar moves in other parts of the world, and reflects the many reasons one can find to break the national borders and sail onto the open sea of historical research. They do not exhaust the list of the reasons why there is profit in going transnational, but they do provide us with a first series of proposals of which I will briefly extract three items.

In some cases, as with Amanda Rasmussen’s study of Chinese Bendigonians networks, it is her historical object, in its deployment, that calls for a gaze

which reaches far beyond the borders of Australia and China. O'Hoy family members operated shops in Australia, Hong-Kong, Singapore, the Fiji Islands, the United States of America and Canada. As many scholars of migrations have found, one cannot grasp the multiple practical and symbolic dimensions of such diasporic networks by sticking to a simple interaction between the place of origin and one of the places of destination. That is a story of many lands, cities and travels which puts the emphasis on the ways migrations, and their complicated itineraries account for the interaction between migrants and their multiple communities. The different volumes put together for the 'Italians Everywhere' project testify for the openings offered by such a view, which brings food for thought for historians of Italian migrations, historians of Italy, historians of the United States of America and of the various lands where Italians migrated to, and also for those who pay interest to proper transnational movements such as socialism or anarchism.<sup>2</sup> Closest from Rasmussen's concerns, Adam McKeown's work on Chinese migrants in three different locations also was a demonstration of the powerful effects of considering the migrants as always 'here and there' instead of focusing on a specific country or place to assess their 'contribution' to a place of destination.<sup>3</sup>

For others, going transnational derives from the necessity to catch not a family, not an ethnic group, but one of those restless individuals who, by duty, strategy or need, lived their lives scattered in many places. Imperial histories are full of those. Laurence Brown's Arthur Hamilton Gordon successively occupied several positions in the high administration of British Crown possessions overseas, implementing or developing imperial policies in Trinidad, Mauritius, Fiji, New Brunswick, New Zealand and Ceylon. Following him offers Brown the opportunity to watch the trickling developments of indenture immigration from one place to another, not through the lens of imperial or local regulation and laws, but in the very process of its inception and management. On a totally different ground, Jill Matthews coped with another travelling figure, a more adventurous type: John Dixon Williams developed his movie industry skills in the United States of America, in Australia, in England and in Canada. Each of his ocean or border crossing was also an occasion to introduce and test his ideas and practices to new contexts, carrying along his former experiences in his luggage, and thus producing a complex set of echoes and interactions at each of this stops. Both Gordon and Williams are almost invisible if the nation is the unit of observation: national film histories hardly pay attention to Williams, for example, and stop to consider him when he leaves the country. They remind of some other similar 'secondary figures' which only a transnational perspective can retrace. Such was Count Harry Graf von Kessler,

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<sup>2</sup> One of the last volumes emanating of the project is Gabaccia, Donna; Iacovetta, Franca, *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives. Italian Workers of the World*, Toronto 2002.

<sup>3</sup> McKeown, Adam, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936*, Chicago 2001.

a German aristocrat born and brought up in France, taught in England and Germany. Kessler spent his adult life between Berlin, Weimar, London and Paris. He was, simultaneously or successively, known as a diplomat, an active pacifist in Weimar Germany, a publisher, an artistic institution director, an author of ballet librettos and a sponsor for performing and visual artists, almost always with a fondness for avantgarde positions. His contribution was significant in many of these spheres, but he was mostly invisible before a biographer pulled together the strings of his multiple lives.<sup>4</sup> When he did, Lair McLeod Easton was able to demonstrate the role of artistic and political broker that Kessler had in the first decade of the centuries, and to introduce us to a cosmopolitan dimension of life in the first decades of the 20th century, that had been progressively forgotten by national or disciplinary histories.

Last but not least, some participants explained that going transnational was a way to pursue, in a different context, their conception of writing history. It was implicit in Marilyn Lake's account that going transnational to study the connections of the Australian feminist activists was sort of a logical spin-off of the 'oppositional' position which had pushed her to investigate subjects like labour and women history when she began her research career. Just as it was oppositional history to write on the working class, feminists or aboriginal rights activists when those groups were not centre stage of Australian society, exploring 'white men's countries' as a circulating worldview is an attack on a narrative of Australian history that defines it as exceptional. In that sense, this 'subversive' use of the transnational angle is rather close from the projects that animate some US historians who, since the early 1990s, have explicitly challenged the definitions of American exceptionality with a project to internationalise American History. This project was expressed collectively in several occasions, where the nation-centred ways of researching, teaching, discussing and writing history were scrutinized.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, one of these collective endeavours, the La Pietra conference series coordinated by Thomas Bender, has given birth to twins: on one hand the La Pietra Report: A Report to the Profession with its proposals to modify the teaching of American history, on the other hand its more academic companion volume, focused on historical research aspects.<sup>6</sup> Individual researches have also participated to the attacks on American exceptionalism through the adoption of a transnational angle. Because of my own research fields, Daniel Rodger's *Atlantic crossings* appears to me as an obvious

<sup>4</sup> Laird McLeod Easton, *The Red Count. The Life and Times of Harry Kessler*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2002.

<sup>5</sup> *The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History*, special issue, *The Journal of American History* 86 (1999). David Thelen, who set up this special issue, had authored several years ago the stimulating: *Of audiences, borderlands and comparisons: toward the internationalisation of American history*, in: *The Journal of American History* 79, issue 2, pp. 432-462.

<sup>6</sup> The first can be found at <http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/#Anchor-20246>. The other is Bender, Thomas (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Berkeley 2002.

example, with its insistence on how social policies and social activism in the United States of America were shaped by a transatlantic trade of ideas from the late 19th century to the end of the 1930s.

Thus, many of the positions and researches that were presented to the Canberra conference connect with some larger trends manifest in historical scholarship. It is clear that these have equivalents in many other places, though probably with different shapes, intensities and questions. They are all somehow the result of how the world has changed recently, and how those changes were echoed in the intellectual and institutional landscape of history, as well as in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. It would be foolish to attempt to depict these changes here. Wide strokes detailing the explosion of the post world war 2 world order, the contrasted feelings derived from the sense of growing interconnections and interdependences between nations and peoples, or the far reaching consequences of the conflicts born out of postmodernist challenges would amount to common places based on *cheap à peu près*. Instead of 'whys?', I propose to make a few suggestions about 'what for?' which can contribute to list some of the gains we can expect from going transnational.

### Going transnational: what for?

One of the most immediate possibilities opened by the adoption of a transnational angle is a contribution to the historicisation of what is commonly called 'globalisation'. Historians, by paying interest to the flows that cut across borders, would be in a position to offer a more precise contextualisation of the ways in which cultural models are diffused, markets extended, relationships between governments and non-governmental groups organised, links among individuals, groups and institutions multiplied on a global or macro-regional scale. We are still far to provide a satisfactory contribution to those discussions. That is especially true for contemporary historians, who are obviously much more nation-bounded than their early-modern or medieval colleagues. That had not always been the case, as Ian Tyrrell or Robin Kelley reminded us,<sup>7</sup> but the close companionship between nation building and history writing first, then between professionalisation of the historical trade and the state, has contributed to our enclosure in national limits. But we can improve our record, and give some depth and distance to the current reflections about if and how the world is changing. Frederick Cooper, an historian of Africa, recently proposed to scrutinize long-distance, long-term connections as a way of avoiding some of the

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<sup>7</sup> Respectively in: *Making Nations/Making States. American Historians in the Context of Empire and: But a Local Phase of a World Problem: Black History's Global Vision*, in: *The Journal of American History* 86 (1999), pp. 1015-72.

conceptual difficulties of research into globalisation.<sup>8</sup> He sees this study of connections as a way to question the generalised trend towards interconnection which has been brought out in a large number of studies on globalisation, while avoiding a hierarchical opposition between the global and the local; a way to relate structures to fluxes and clarify approaches to the history of territorial processes, not forgetting that there may be hiccups in a not continuous nor linear movement towards integration, and that any relationship thus defined may turn out to be discontinuous. His approach is an attractive one, especially since, while it may not be easy to keep track of all the components even in a single connection, it does seem feasible to apply the procedure to an empirical analysis of how links are created between places, groups and individuals. Transnational connections are one aspect of these, especially relevant for the contemporary era when, in a simultaneous movement, regional and global flows of all sorts become more salient and important while the nation-states borders are increasingly prescriptive and coercitive when it is about controlling those flows and movements. If we can (and we can) document and account for the formation, operations and impacts of markets, social movements, international associations, migration flows, intellectual exchanges and other chains of links and connections, we will have something to bring into the current discussions about globalisation. Thus coping with the transnational angle in our respective researches is one of the ways to 'narrate the world's past in an age of globality', as Michael Geyer and Charles Bright once put it.<sup>9</sup> Of course, when engaging these present questions through their historical conditions, historians are not exempt of the 'global babble' virus, but they probably can do something against its extension.

One way leading to a controlled investigation of these questions is to develop our investigations about the 'universal'. This term was present in the discussion at Canberra, as well as in some of the papers which were presented. Two of them can be used here to suggest how the transnational angle suggests a shift from 'universal history' to a 'history of the universal'.<sup>10</sup> Joanna Bourke's presentation, connected to her forthcoming book on the history of fear, touched upon the question of the universality of emotional expressions in general and how it was, for 19th century physiognomists especially, a tool to discuss the boundaries of humankind of civilization. Her exploration did move between places (England, France, Germany), but not her object. She was not considering how different conceptions of emotions may have migrated from a place to another, nor did she pay attention to the circulation of definitions or images or

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<sup>8</sup> Cooper, Frederick, What is the concept of globalization good for? An African Historian's perspective, in: *African affairs* 100 (2001), pp. 189-213.

<sup>9</sup> World History in a global age, in: *The American Historical Review* 100 (1996), pp. 1034-1060.

<sup>10</sup> This proposal is formulated out of the control of the two authors, who shall not be made responsible for my interpretation of their contributions.

texts dealing with emotions. And she was perfectly right not to do so. Her angle was to offer a view as wide as possible of past positions regarding the question of emotions. Reversely though still on the question of emotions, Hsu-Ming Teo paid a sheer attention to how romantic love was and is a stake in intellectual debates as well as in marketing strategies that cut across national borders and civilisation boundaries. The 20th century massive commodification of love and the development of 'romantic consumption' she described were, pushed forth by the marketing policies of the entertainment industry and, more recently, by those of the Valentine specialists. The definition of romantic love as being or not universal has been an object for discussion and debates in the social sciences and in history, as Teo reminded us. But the circulation of its definition and signs is also a prerequisite for practices which can generate massive symbolic and material profits. These diverse circulations were the fabric of Teo's paper. There is more here than a mere change in our vocabulary. The difference is not between using 'universal' as a descriptive adjective to qualify the territory of our work and taking 'the universal' as a noun, which designates a subject for our investigations. With Teo, we touch upon a growing body of research which propose to bring interests, actors, projects and strategies back into the study of the universal which tends to be presented as natural, neutral, disinterested and self-fulfilling. A recent issue of the French journal 'Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales' can illustrate this pitch.<sup>11</sup> The contributors' common concern is to pay attention to the individuals and the collective bodies which compete to define and disseminate what is 'the universal' in different spheres. In an historical perspective which stretches from the late 19th century to the early 21st century, they broach on such diverse matters as the forms of corporate governance, their markets and their specialists who spread them over the capitalist world, the policies of the major US philanthropic Foundations, the technical assistance policies towards the former 'Eastern Block' or the establishment of a cross border community of public administration practitioners and scholars. Together, they suggest that there is profit to be gained by considering 'the universal' as a stake and to pay attention to the struggles that have paved its definition and circulation.

Last but not least, adopting the transnational angle may have a 'reflexive' impact on the production of historical knowledge. That is what Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann have proposed in several publications that develop their proposal for a 'histoire croisée', literally 'crossed history'.<sup>12</sup> I won't try to

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<sup>11</sup> Sociologie de la mondialisation. Héritiers cosmopolites, mercenaires de l'impérialisme et missionnaires de l'universel, n° 151-152, January 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Werner, Michael; Zimmermann, Bénédicte, Penser l'histoire croisée: entre empirie et réflexivité, in: *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales* 58 (2003), pp. 7-36 or: Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002), pp. 607-636. They also co-edited a journal special issue exploring those methodological and epistemological tracks: *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*, Le Genre Humain, Paris 2004.



propose a more adequate translation for that term. Rather, I will attempt to sum up its meaning and to survey the consequences of their proposals for those who want to develop a transnational take. 'Histoire croisée', for Werner and Zimmermann, belongs to the family of historical approaches which put the emphasis on relations, together with comparative history, connected history, shared history or the history of transfers. Though they are keen to distinguish *histoire croisée* from all these, as they think it solves many of the others' short flaws, they do insist that it shares with them a concern for the links between different historical formations. An approach inspired by *histoire croisée* concerns pays interest to where and when those historical formations intersect, to the crossings themselves. In one of their contributions, they mention four kind of crossings, most often intertwined in practical research situations: historical crossings which are the subject of historical research (e. g how Daniel Rodgers' US reformers worked with European social policies to achieve their goals on the domestic scene); engineered crossings that the researcher operates when he defines his subject (e. g a study of the teaching of ancient history in the Soviet system of higher education); educational crossings between the researcher and the subject of historical research (e. g French researchers who engage a Franco German subject from their national training and position) and spatial crossings (e. g how a research on unemployment municipal policies in Germany between 1890 and 1927 must deploy its investigation to cut across what is often considered as embedded and hierarchized scales, from 'local' to 'international').<sup>13</sup> For Werner and Zimmermann, those multiple crossings require a more careful consideration of the categories which are engaged into research, by the researchers and despite/beyond them. Paying attention to crossings implies that the researchers should take into consideration their embarked categories, worldviews, concepts, terminologies, as they were shaped in and by their training, their language, their positions. By seriously focusing on crossings, researchers are forced to consider how their own arsenal is the result of multiple crossings. There is more into Werner and Zimmermann's sophisticated developments – sometimes much too sophisticated for this writer, but clearly these points have almost all been touched upon in the conversations during the Canberra conference. They suggest that adopting a transnational angle calls for the development of a reflexive outlook on our ways and means to write history. The last section of this introductory paper will briefly review some of those aspects.

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the examples are taken out of Werner and Zimmermann's contributions, other fall into the responsibility of this author.

## Reflexive reflections

As I am not comfortable or enthusiast enough about the epistemological aspects Werner and Zimmermann are fond of, I will stick to very practical aspects of the reflexive concern that going transnational may entice, and bundle them into three groups of questions. The first will suggest that going transnational may impose supplementary requirements upon us. The second will develop a specific methodological point derived from my own research experience. And the third will be a first approach to the specific question of who is able to research, write and publish transnational history. But, before even skimming over those, it is worth mentioning a first basic reflexive consideration. We scarcely choose our research angle haphazardly, and there are all sorts of relationships between what we investigate and what we are. So we should keep in mind that 'transnational history' may be not more than the most obvious take for historians whose social and cultural background, personal and professional trajectories, lifestyles and activities develop in the word 'in-between' nations, continents and civilizations. That should save us from a terrible derived historiographical fallacy that we might turn an idiosyncrasy into a scientific paradigm.

Fortunately, adopting the transnational angle is not an easy track, and that should help us to keep a clear mind. Chief amongst our safeguards is probably the set of new requirements that the transnational angle requests from the historian. To study connections and circulation, to put them in context with the social units they cling on together, the researcher ought to be able to conduct research in different languages, to make himself familiar with several archival systems and historiographical traditions and questions, to learn how to imagine the sources which can help to answer his questions. This person cannot be complacent with her own limits, inherited from her linguistic domain (however large), from her training, from her habits. The transnational call is also a call for more work on our behalf, and should push us to extend our professional imagination and toolbox. That is probably even stronger for those of us whose language has been given some universal pretension by the works of colonial or economic expansion. English, Spanish and French speakers, more than others, should dive into other linguistic worlds. Though, this does not mean we shall dream of becoming ubiquitous almighty polyglots. First because the transnational angle can be engaged from national or local documentary and archival sources. Second because developing a transnational perspective also brings about a renewed humbleness, that which comes from the sheer sense that one is never able to assemble all the pieces, to pull all the strings, to build the complete line up of skills that are required. And after all, it is logistical common sense to realize that you won't be able to have the time, funding and energy to follow all the trails that are traceable from a transnational point of view. Thus the results of a transnational research may always have to do with a sense of

failure and incompleteness: knowing about our limits should save us from disappointment, but also from the ego trips which sometimes push us historians to believe we have written the final and ultimate volume on a subject. That won't be bad, at a time when publishers' catalogues and dust jackets blurbs invent masterworks for every season. There is at least one other point where the transnational angle means higher requirements. Critics of comparative history have rightly pointed that the comparative outlook is almost asymmetrical. It goes from one historical formation (usually a national one) to another. This second formation is usually scrutinized with categories that are indigenous to the first. Thus, comparison is scarcely a symmetrical observation of two or more formations. It proceeds from one to question the other(s). To study connections and circulation has a decentring effect that offers some degree of an antidote. The very objects of the research pull us researchers out of our frames of reference, and installs observation in the 'world in-between'. This puts the classical units of comparative history, especially national formations, under a different light, their hold on us becoming more obvious, and maybe more controllable.

Though some of the former considerations are partly drawn from a personal research experience, the following one is really a fruit of a research experience.<sup>14</sup> Attempting to chart the machinery of a transnational formation means to sketch and analyse a structured space of interconnections and relationships which cut across what we are inclined to see as separated and autonomous spatial, social and cultural planes (mostly, the declensions of 'place': community, city, region, nation ...).<sup>15</sup> But such interconnections and relationships often do not follow the lines of our usual spatial metaphors and tools. The local is not by nature shaped by the global, the regional or the international is not the ultimate concretion of national facts and groups, and you often don't dramatically alter what you observe when you get 'closer' or 'further'. The photographic analogy with the zoom, the geographically inspired idea of 'scale' don't do. Moreover, the directions of causal relationships between those 'levels' are uncertain enough to suggest that adopting the transnational angle may call for putting the whole thing under a different light. What happens in a specific place under the action of specific individuals or groups is not deprived of universal consequences, while global and regional groups can develop policies and programs that stretch straight to local contexts. Going transnational is not about adding a new 'scale' to many others, but rather to tackle activities that develop across, above, under, with or against spatial categories and formations we are used to, one of the results being to question the very idea of 'scale'. One of the consequences of this reconsideration goes like this: if we take the trans-

<sup>14</sup> Material available at <http://cassiopee.univ-yon3.fr/umr5600/chercheur/saunier/index.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> For a contemporary assessment of this, see the convincing papers gathered by Callaghy, Thomas; Kassimir, Ronald ; Latham, Robert, *Intervention and Transnationalism in Africa*. GlobalLocal Networks of Power, Cambridge 2001.

national angle as a historical gaze which follows connections which stretch through local, national and regional or global experiences, then it is clear that this angle must build on the experience and results of local, national and comparative historical scholarship. Precisely because the study of interconnections makes it necessary to contextualise the who, what, where and why of connections, its relationship to other more traditional frames of historical scholarship should be of a complementary nature. Also, while the transnational objects have their own ways and their own history, it is clear that the trajectories of people, goods, capital, words and might are shaped by the history of national, local, regional or global formations. To forget it would lead to a sad dead-end. Indeed it would be a loss if the transnational angle was developed at the expense of the local, national, comparative or world history perspectives. For sure, I also know that the transnational angle will have to make a place of its own in the current institutional structures of history as a trade, a discipline and a market. We have learned enough from the history and sociology of science to know that scientific disputes are also about academic positions, grants, publication opportunities. They are also rooted in the social and cultural trajectories of the protagonists. It is quite unlikely we can escape this. But the history of the social sciences and humanities are also full of so-called 'turns' where the practical opponents to a so-called 'new approach' are forced out on weak scientific grounds, in an exaggerated mutual game of opposition and denigration. I am naive enough, though, to think that one can try to introduce a different perspective without playing the usual academic tricks. It can also be an interesting experience to propose to be different without wanting to be hegemonic.

It is all the more necessary that going transnational is not as easy as it sounds. Of course, what I have been sketching is sound, then it is clear that the transnational approach can be developed with small means. The transnational perspective can be engaged from the community level, and one does not by force need big money and long travels to turn out a stimulating and useful book or article that follows connections and relationships that cut across local, national, regional or global scenes. So, transnational history is also likely to be done from the periphery of the current economic and cultural world order. That is probably the condition so that transnational history fulfils one of its obvious aims, which is to contribute to historicize what we call globalisation by a careful and detailed study of interconnections in the modern era. But there are some constraints which bear upon the 'who' factor. Who then, is most likely to do research in 'transnational history'? This calls for some attention being paid to the geopolitics of history at world scale. Which institutions, be they countries or universities or private organizations, will be more enticed to support research and teaching programs in transnational history? The most obvious possibility is that, growing from seeds by long sown by philanthropic Foundations and some big universities such as Harvard or the MIT, some domestic considerations (to support or contest governmental foreign policy) might well boost

the already blossoming interest in transnational history on the North American side of the Atlantic Ocean. This West would lead the Rest. That would bring yet another asteroid angle of Clio's galaxy to gravitate around the US academic scene. This is all the more possible that many of us who want to go transnational have found that the American magnet is possibly stronger in this field than in others. Going transnational, as it can require many reading and research tracks to be followed, makes the US academic landscape more and more attractive: libraries, grants, relevant teaching and research units conspire to lure us to some campus there. This appeal is even stronger if the research focuses on the 20th century: the transnational role played by the USA means that this country now holds many private and public papers which are high on the priority list for the historian of connections and circulations. From all those clues, there is a double concern to be derived.

The first is about the places and institutions from which a transnational gaze could be developed. In the paper he presented at the yearly meeting of Italian modern historians in 2003, Federico Romero told about his fears of an international division of intellectual work.<sup>16</sup> What he feared was a growing distinction between a happy few well endowed academic institutions which would be devoted to interdisciplinary research trying to 'tell the pasts of our age of globality' as Geyer and Bright said, while the rest of the research oriented institutions would have to get along with local or national history niches. Romero, though I may force his arguments a little, also suggested that this division could well match the division of labour and benefits which are operating in what we call the globalisation process. To the happy few institutions, the implicit duty to tell the tale of globalisation, to the others the likely task to elaborate national and local reactions towards it. This prospect will not seem attractive to many, whichever side of the cleavage line we would find ourselves. This points to the second concern, one that cannot be escaped in a reflexive perspective: is transnational history to be the handmaiden of globalisation (either to support or to denounce it) just as national historical scholarship contributed to the legitimisation of the nation state?

This risk has been voiced out clearly by Louis A. Pérez Jr. in his review of *Rethinking American history in a global age*.<sup>17</sup> Perez wonders how much 'The proposition of a transnational historiography may well serve as intellectual currency to advance the ideological purpose of global capitalism'. That is not an unlikely outcome, though I would argue that the contributors to *Rethinking* did not see it this way, as Thomas Bender makes it clear from the introduction. But I would like to suggest that this risk could be controlled if those who go transnational do it not only to challenge the national narratives, or to attack a

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<sup>16</sup> Romero, Federico, *La globalizzazione e la storia delle relazioni internazionali*, Convegno SISSCO, Lecce, September 2003.

<sup>17</sup> *We Are the World: Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International*, in: *The Journal of American History* 89 (2002).

specific national exceptionalism, but to address the questions of interconnections, circulations and fluxes as such and for their own sake. If that is the case, the proposition of a transnational historiography may well serve as intellectual currency to systematically analyse the ideological purpose of global capitalism, to use Pérez' words.

## Conclusion: of agendas and manifestos

What Pérez also points in his review is the importance of the current moment. We are at a stage when those who want to go transnational must define their agenda, their list of questions to be addressed, precautions to be taken, purposes to be achieved. It may be quite important that they do it according to where they write from. Though *Rethinking American history in a global age* is explicitly not presented as a brief to be followed with obedience, nor a beacon which light should sweep the world, it is important to stress that it sketches just one of the possible visions of what 'going transnational' means. This vision is that of American historians who participate to the challenge to the American national historical narrative. Their quest to 'internationalise American history' is, I would say, one of the many possible 'local' declensions of the transnational angle. It belongs to all of us to offer other local contributions and agendas, to develop other versions of the transnational angle which don't address national situations but cut straight into rather the regional or global dimension, and to participate in the internationalisation of many national histories which connect and intersected. To give but one example featured in Canberra, John Maynard's research on the Aboriginal connections with Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalist Movement is likely to be a contribution not only to Aboriginal, American or Australian history, but also to the history of transnational social movements. A plurality of proposals, and above all of researches, will be a way to answer to another question that Artur Pérez formulated: 'Is this New World Order of triumphant capitalism, with the United States unchallenged, in an oft-repeated phrase, as "the world's only superpower", in need of a new historical narrative to render righteous the emergence of American global dominance?'. If many voices shape this 'new historical narrative', if we can approach the ways in which the 'universal' was and is an object of struggles fought by many contenders, then the transnational approach will be more than a teleological view of the past tailored to suit the present.

This plurality of ways and means to go transnational will certainly generate its lot of questions. The discussions that took place in Canberra brought out some. We talked about definitions; we wondered how much the transnational angle was similar or different from world history or universal history. We tried to sort out differences between the history of internationalism and the transnational approach. We were curious to know how far one could use the term

‘transnational’ for moments that came before national states became the crucial coercitive prescribers of norms they became in the contemporary era. Those concerns are justified, and they echo similar questions that were and are salient in different forums.<sup>18</sup> But do those questions need definitive answers? I would like to end this report by the wishful thinking that we keep those possibilities opened as long as possible, and that those going transnational refrain from writing a canon for doing so. The history of the avant-gardes in art, literature and the social science has taught us that the secret of those paper revolutions was not a very precious one.<sup>19</sup> Though the history of all changes cannot be abruptly wrapped and summed up in one sentence, the rhetoric of rupture is predominant in the manifestos of all kind which proclaimed and claimed the radical difference of a new trend, group or discipline. Accordingly, manifesto writing has indeed become quite boring, and sounds as a list on which one should not forget to check the appropriate boxes. ‘Provocation’: checked. ‘Delegitimisation of former generation’: checked. ‘Reckless assertions of newness’: checked. ‘Outradicalisation of others’: checked. In an age of ‘expressive individualism’,<sup>20</sup> it has become a cliché to write cut and burn manifestos. Until now, those who engaged with the transnational angle fortunately did not embrace this way.<sup>21</sup> Despite its catch all title (‘Rethinking’), the *La Pietra* volume is not a compendium of papers calling to go ‘beyond’ certain approaches or supporting ‘new’ approaches. And that is what makes it valuable. The line is thin between neologism and cliché. Being catholic, lucid, reflexive and modest in our approach may be what ultimately, can us save the transnational angle to become a cliché too early. That should also allow us to feel, a bit longer, this ‘excitement of possibilities’ that was ours in Canberra.

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<sup>18</sup> Among the several pieces which I am indebted to in the writing of this report, I would like to add the followings for further reading into this direction: Cooper Frederick, *Networks, moral discourses and history*, in: Callaghy, Thomas; Kassimir, Ronald; Latham, Robert (eds.), *Intervention and Transnationalism in Africa. Global-Local Networks of Power*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 23-46; Tyrell, Ian, *American exceptionalism in an age of international history*, in: *American Historical Review*, 96 (1991), pp. 1031-72; Geyer, Martin; Paulmann, Johannes (eds.), *The mechanics of internationalism. Culture, society and politics from the 1840s to the First World War*, London 2003, the special issues of the Spanish journal *Studia Historia* focusing on ‘La historia transnacional’ in 1998, or the March 2004 issue of the Italian journal *Contemporanea* with its forum section on transnational history.

<sup>19</sup> Often, original material is even more revealing than historical and sociological scholarships. Reading the correspondence between Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the men behind the *Annales* school, is one of those fascinating travels in the making of an historiographical revolution seen through its (inseparable) scientific and practical aspects. See *Correspondance March Bloch – Lucien Febvre, 1928-1943*, edited by Bertrand Müller, Paris 1994-2003, 3 vols.

<sup>20</sup> See Winfried Fluck, ‘The modernity of America and the practice of scholarship’, in: Bender, *Rethinking...*, pp. 343-366.

<sup>21</sup> This ‘modest’ attitude is very clear in *Rethinking American History in a global age*.